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SUBJECT: NORTHERN NIGERIAN MUSLIM VIEWS OF THE UNITED STATES

REF: 09 ABUJA 2352

CLASSIFIED BY: James P. McNulty, Political Counselor, U.S. Embassy
Abuja, Political Section; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Muslim scholars, government officials, politicians, professors, students, and civil society representatives discussed their views on the United States and its foreign policy with PolOffs during a visit in January to the Northern Nigerian state of Sokoto. Many interlocutors expressed appreciation for President Obama's June 2009 speech in Cairo and conveyed optimism that the Obama administration would improve U.S. relations with the Muslim world. They cited resolution of the crisis in the Middle East, however, as key to improving such relations. Most contacts viewed U.S. foreign policy as one-sided in its support of Israel, but considered the U.S. as responsible for negotiating peace. Several Mission contacts said all other forms of engagement with Muslim communities are meaningless unless there is peace in the Middle East. The views of some Nigerian Muslims shifted in the wake of Nigerian suspect Faruk Umaru Abdulmutallab's December 25 attempted attack on a U.S. commercial airliner. Nigeria's Muslim community condemned Abdulmutallab's actions in unconditional and unequivocal terms, but, after the U.S. added Nigeria to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) list as a "country of interest," Mission contacts began to express embarrassment, anger, and suspicion. END SUMMARY.

NIGERIAN MUSLIMS STRESS IMPORTANCE OF MIDDLE EAST PEACE

2. (SBU) Sokoto residents spoke highly of President Obama, his June 2009 speech in Cairo, and U.S. plans to improve relations with the Muslim world. Interlocutors cautioned PolOffs, however, that Muslims are "like one body" and a "global village" and therefore view peace in the Middle East as the essential factor in promoting a better view of the U.S. within Muslim communities.

13. (C) Usmanu Danfodiyo University Professor of Arabic Studies Sambo Wali Junaidu described President Obama's Cairo speech as "positive," "pleasing," and "most accommodating." He added, however, that people want to see the U.S. President put his words into action, specifically by resolving the Middle East conflict. He said Northern Nigerian Muslims, for example, believe the U.S. can force Israel to stop building settlements.

14. (C) Separately, three prominent Muslim scholars explained the importance they attach to U.S. policy in the Middle East. Usmanu Danfodiyo University Professor and Muslim scholar Adamu Abdullahi said the new U.S. approach to engagement with Muslim communities is "different" and "good," but Muslims worldwide wanted to see concrete results, especially in resolving the Middle East conflict. He recommended that the U.S. engage in "sincere dialogue" and use its influence, for example, to stop Israel from building settlements. Likewise, Muslim scholar Mansur Ibrahim said Nigerian Muslims are pleased with Obama's speeches and optimistic that the current administration will bring peace, but are still waiting to see the U.S. "take action." Like Professors Junaidu and Abdullahi, Ibrahim held that Israel would not continue to build settlements if the U.S. was serious about pursuing peace in the Middle East. Sociology Associate Professor Suleiman Khalid also said Obama's inaugural address and his Cairo speech were well received by Muslims, but that they "expect to see it translated into practice." Khalid explained that Northern Nigerians have many identities, including political, ethnic, and geographic. However, most

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strongly identify themselves as Muslim, and are, therefore, conscious of what happens to their "brothers" throughout the world. He added that, despite low literacy in Northern Nigeria, the population is aware of global affairs from international radio programs.

15. (SBU) During a youth round-table discussion at the American Corner in Sokoto, some students, particularly those who had traveled to the U.S., stated that they viewed President Obama's speech in Cairo as "amazing" and appreciated his quoting of the Koran. Others, however, remarked that the U.S. and Europe are not sincere in their efforts to engage the Muslim world. One student said, when he heard the U.S. President speak in Cairo, he thought the speech was "purely politics." Some students said that the U.S. shows aggression and interference in Islamic countries and urged the U.S. to refrain from intervening in countries' internal affairs.

SHIFTING ATTITUDES, GROWING SUSPICIONS

16. (SBU) Sokoto interlocutors condemned Abdulmutallab's actions, insisting that Islam is a religion of peace. Many expressed embarrassment from the event. Media reports that the U.S. had added Nigeria as a "country of interest," however, have caused Nigerian Muslims to feel harshly judged and discriminated against by the U.S., which has led people to become angry and suspicious.

17. (C) Muslim scholar Khalid said the Abdulmutallab incident is "strange" to Nigeria since suicide bombing is not part of Nigerian culture, which contributed to skepticism and conspiracy theories. Khalid expressed skepticism over the ability of Abdulmutallab to pass through the various security screenings if he had had the bomb

materials on him at the time. He asserted the possibility that Abdulmutallab had undergone "hypnosis" after which someone had planted the bomb on him. He even wondered whether the U.S. might have set up the incident as an excuse to invade Yemen. Echoing arguments heard from other Nigerian interlocutors, Khalid questioned why the U.S. had not placed Great Britain on a security watch list after the "shoe bomber" incident or after learning that Abdulmutallab had received much of his higher education in London.

¶18. (C) Opposition Democratic People's Party (DPP) Sokoto State Secretary Athair Mohammed insisted to PolOffs that U.S. reaction to Abdulmutallab's attempted attack contrasted with the President's message in Cairo. He claimed that the U.S.-Nigeria relationship was "irreparable" as a result of Nigeria's inclusion as a "country of interest." He opined that the U.S. should not place names of individuals on any watch list, as he feared that persons with similar names would suffer.

¶19. (C) Federal Organization of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN) Sokoto Branch representatives emphasized to PolOffs that they did not condone Abdulmutallab's actions, calling the attempted attack "lamentable." They, too, said an unfair bias now existed against Nigerians as a result of one individual's actions.

¶110. (C) Professor Junaidu said Nigerian Muslims did not support Abdulmutallab's actions, blaming him for what he attempted to do, but described the U.S. reaction as "wrong." He described the TSA listing of Nigeria as a "miscarriage of justice." Junaidu remarked that the U.S. should not hold 150 million Nigerians accountable for

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one person's actions. He expressed disappointment that the Secretary of State had described Abdulmutallab as "an enemy waging war on America," advising that U.S. officials should not repeat this phrase. He recommended that the U.S. extradite Abdulmutallab to Nigeria for prosecution and sentencing.

¶111. (C) Sokoto State Permanent Secretary for Political and Chieftaincy Affairs Salihu Muhammad Gatawa said "Americans need to understand that there is a great difference between a Muslim and an extremist." He opined that the need existed to enhance security and surveillance, while simultaneously educating and enlightening others about real Islam. He said suicide is contrary to both Islam and Nigerian culture. He commented that many people do not consider Abdulmutallab to be a real Nigerian.

¶112. (SBU) Students said they felt "stigmatized" by the inclusion of Nigeria on the U.S. list of "countries of interest." Some students expressed doubts about the accuracy of the accounts of Abdulmutallab's actions and believed that the incident could involve a conspiracy.

¶113. (C) Usmanu Danfodiyo University Centre for Peace Studies Director T. A. Muhammad Baba, who had initially offered to assist PolOffs in organizing a discussion with students, later demurred, saying he did not consider the timing for the visit to be good. He described the environment in Sokoto following Abdulmutallab's arrest as "too tense." Baba told PolOffs that some people had become suspicious of his intentions and asked if he worked for the "CIA." He remarked that even some professors refused to meet with visiting PolOffs. Similarly, the Muslim scholars said those who support development programs are seen by others as "U.S. agents."

CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT

¶14. (C) Sokoto contacts generally believed that the American people are accepting of Muslims, but alleged that U.S. foreign policy was damaging to Muslim communities and said the U.S. government "has to change." Muslim scholar Abdullahi said the U.S. is currently only "treating the symptoms." He asserted that exchange opportunities and programs in Muslim communities are not addressing the real problems in the Muslim world. Moreover, he said U.S. foreign policies negate the achievements and progress made from these types of outreach. He recommended that the U.S. begin to do things that "give Muslim people confidence." Abdullahi's colleague Khalid accused the U.S. of having double standards and said "it seems the American people elect governments that act in contrast to them." He said Muslims believe the United States instigated the 1980 to 1988 war between Iraq and Iran. When asked which country they thought the U.S. should emulate, the religious scholars said, "China is the ideal example of a country promoting development while practicing non-interference."

¶15. (SBU) DPP Sokoto State Secretary Athair Mohammed suggested that more diplomatic dialogue and messages countering negative media reports would be needed to improve U.S.-Nigeria relations following the Abdulmutallab incident. FOMWAN Sokoto State Secretary Fatima Ahmad said people in the area, especially women, remained concerned with their ability to practice their religion freely. The FOMWAN representatives encouraged the U.S. to continue dialogue, visits, and exchange opportunities. They suggested that the U.S. may need to "relax some of the rules." Sokoto State Religious Affairs Permanent Secretary Abubakar Nababa Umar said the U.S. should "put forward its intentions" and continue to provide humanitarian assistance through nongovernmental organizations. Sokoto Governor

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Wamakko said he hoped the U.S. would reinstate the Peace Corps in addition to continuing to offer exchange opportunities.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Nigeria's TSA listing rankled many Nigerians, both Muslim and Christian, but the broader suspicions and skepticisms of these Muslim elites reflect the paranoia and disinformation frequently promoted by extremist websites and other Islamist portals. It is unclear how deep these sentiments run in Northern Nigeria, but there's no question that the region's low literacy, underdevelopment, and relative isolation foster an environment vulnerable to extremist manipulation. END COMMENT.
SANDERS